

Joint Statement

Pre-Session for the second Universal Periodical Review of the Syrian Arab Republic

This statement is submitted on behalf of a coalition of eight Syrian organizations with the support of EuroMed Rights (EMHRN), namely The Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), The Day After (TDA), The Syrian Centre for Statistics and Research (SCRS), The Syrian League for Citizenship (SL4C), Urnamo Foundation, Syrian Institute for Justice, Syrian Center for Legal Research and Studies (SCRS), Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC).

Information included in the joint contribution report are entirely based on data gathered by the above mentioned Syrian organizations. Our coalition gathers organizations conducting human rights documentation in Syria throughout their local contacts across the country, as well as groups addressing issues such as legal accountability, women's rights, casualty recording and Transitional Justice. We have established this alliance with the view to produce a joint analysis of the situation and to advocate jointly on the Syrian government's blatant violations of its international commitments.

None of our organizations was able to conduct consultations with the Syrian government, which forbids any independent human rights organizations to operate in Syria, and targets our colleagues by all means, including arbitrary arrests, extra-judiciary killing and a wide range of persecutions which have been widely documented by Syrian and international human rights organizations.

I - Torture and ill conditions of detention

As the movement of peaceful protest erupted in March 2011, the Syrian Authorities reacted with violent practices similar to those it exerted for decades against political opposition, but to an unprecedented extent. Unarmed protesters were killed and large scale campaigns of arrests were conducted with the support of military forces. Sports stadiums, schools and movie theaters were turned into detention facilities as the capacities of regular detention centers were rapidly exceeded. *The SNHR has documented 130,000 cases of arbitrary arrests until March 2014, while VDC has documented 63,000 cases of arbitrary arrest up to March 2016.*

Detention conditions have deteriorated as the number of detainees increased and as the Syrian government failed to provide appropriate conditions within detention centers under its jurisdiction. Hundreds of deaths among detainees were documented because of hunger and disease. However, torture remains the main reason for death among detainees. *In 2013, VDC published a report concluding to the death of at least 3,000 detainees since March 2011. By mid-2015, the SNHR documented more than 11,000 cases of death under torture.*

Women were also exposed to arbitrary arrests due to their participation in demonstrations, media, humanitarian relief activities, or for contributing to documenting human rights violations. Increasingly, women were arrested in a bid to put pressure on their relatives and as reprisals against them. Cases of sexual abuse and rapes against women were documented. We believe that the Syrian government resorts to these practices in order to damage the social fabric of the communities it perceives as being supportive to the opposition.

Children represent another vulnerable group among detainees. *Since 2011, VDC has documented about 112 children killed under torture, including 2 girls.*

Evidence gathered is sufficient to state that the Syrian government has failed to implement any of the recommendations aimed at ending practice of torture in prisons and detention facilities, which are today widespread and systematic.

In this regard, we would like to recommend to the Syrian government the following:

- Respect the right to peaceful assembly and freedom of association
- Release all those detained arbitrarily, in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2139
- Provide unconditional access for independent and international organization to monitor all detention facilities in Syria
- Take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of all detainees, with particular attention to the situation of women and children in custody.

II – Illegal sieges on civilian communities

Illegal sieges of entire communities have become of the most prominent characteristic of the conflict in Syria. There are currently more than half a million civilians under siege, prevented to access food, clean water, fuel, and medical supplies. A majority of besieged areas is located in areas under the control of opposition forces and therefore fall under the responsibility of the Syrian government. In these areas, the Syrian government has systematically targeted vital infrastructure, including hospitals, health clinics, schools, and bakeries. To do so, the Syrian authorities used barrel bombs and internationally banned weapons, including chemical weapons. Aid agencies have rarely been able to provide humanitarian aid to the besieged areas due to the ban imposed by the Syrian government. On several instances, the Syrian government deliberately targeted humanitarian crews and relief convoys.

Despite the fact that Syria has not signed the Second Optional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, which prohibits the use of starvation as a weapon of war in a non-international armed conflicts, this principle has become customary rule enshrined in international humanitarian law. Hence, it applies to the Syrian context. As a result, practices of the Syrian government in this context amount to war crimes.

In this regard, we would like to recommend to the Syrian government the following:

- Lift illegal sieges immediately and allow unfettered access of humanitarian convoys without delay or obstruction.
- Implement all Security Council resolutions pertaining to unhindered access of humanitarian aid

III - Transitional Justice:

Recommendations made during the previous Universal Periodical Review of Syria include engaging in a serious and inclusive dialogue in order to reach a peaceful resolution to the violence that started at the time spreading in the country. Some of the recommendations referred specifically to the participation of civil society, and to encourage women's participation in political life.

Despite the fact that this recommendation was accepted by the Syrian authorities, no genuine dialogue was initiated with various components of the Syrian political spectrum or independent civil society groups, and violence exerted in the first place by State security apparatus triggered a cycle of violence that gradually extended across the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Your Excellences, Diplomats and Ambassadors of State,

The extent of gross violations committed for the last five years in Syria cannot be covered in this statement or in the report we submitted as a contribution to the Universal Periodic Review. Figures point to the deaths of more than half a million people in Syria since the outbreak of the popular protests in Syria in 2011. There are currently more than 12 million Syrians in urgent need of humanitarian assistance, including 5.5 million children. According to United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), we are facing the largest humanitarian disaster in the world in terms of displacement of population.

As we speak, the Syrian government and its allies are imposing a siege on Aleppo, the second largest city in Syria, where quarter of a million people is trapped. Governmental forces are targeting hospitals and essential civilian facilities deliberately and systematically. Violations of international humanitarian law reached unprecedented levels at the expense of the civilian population which is deprived of any form of protection.

We, the above mentioned organizations, demand that international mechanisms be set in place in order to compel the Syrian government to end these violations and with the view to prosecute perpetrators of international crimes. The Syrian people have begun to lose hope in international justice, which could pave the way for the continuation of the cycle of violence. It is our shared responsibility to take genuine action to restore hope and justice for Syria.